

Beyond Juche, the religious lives of North Koreans

Radio Free Asia / HRWF Int. (31.08.2005) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - North Korean defectors are finding religious faith in large numbers as they face intense suffering and hardship in their flight from hunger and repression in their homeland, defectors and religious activists have told RFA's Korean service in a series of in-depth interviews.

There are also reports that underground churches are beginning to flourish in the isolated Stalinist state, which preaches its own doctrine of juche, or self-reliance, and forbids all but the most limited forms of state-sponsored worship.

"There was a Bible used for a long time in my home," a recently defected North Korean woman told RFA's Korean service. "With it, we used to sing hymns, and my grandmother preached."

"Also, somebody came from Aoji mine and preached in a different way; We just sang hymns in soft voices, not loudly. I was young at that time and kept an eye on the outside to see if someone was approaching," the woman, who asked to remain anonymous, said.

The woman said her family had been unofficial Christians for three generations, and that the meetings were attended by around 10 other believers.

Later, however, the North Korean intelligence service became suspicious of their activities and installed hidden listening devices in each home.

Christian family relocated

About one year later, the family and relatives were forced to move to another place and they were never allowed to return home, she said.

"My daddy was arrested. Then my grandmother died of sorrow, and all my family had to undergo harsh investigation from the Intelligence Service and were then expelled to a secluded place," she said, adding that they were charged with political crimes.

The woman said she was unaware of the minority of Catholic and other believers permitted to worship under the watchful eye of North Korea's Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il.

"As they captured my daddy, I thought that the country regarded Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as gods and never dreamed that there were churches in Pyongyang," she said.

Lee Soon Ja, a defector who made it to South Korea three years ago, said the official churches were largely a propaganda tool to show foreign believers living in or visiting Pyongyang.

Repatriated converts still had to conduct their worship in secret, with no access to the official churches, she said.

Defectors follow those who help

Defector Lee Nam Soo has begun flying balloons carrying the Gospel towards his homeland from a nearby island, hoping to counteract government propaganda that shows foreign missionaries torturing children, he told RFA.

"This, at half of A4 size, contains what the Gospels mean, the correct information about missionaries to counteract what has been introduced to them as the beast of the beasts, and about Christianity as a den of spies and other disinformation," Lee told RFA.

"How can the North Korean government block their landing on the mountains and hills? There seems to be no way of doing so."

If a Buddhist priest leads him, he goes to a temple, and if a Sister, then he goes to a Catholic church. This is absolutely true.

Kim Sung Min, chairman, Association of North Korean Defectors

Kim Sung Min, chairman of the Association of North Korean Defectors in South Korea, said defectors were naturally drawn at times of danger and hardship to follow the faiths of those who helped them.

"There are many Buddhist priests and [Catholic] nuns in [the Chinese border town of] Yanji, who are visiting there. A priest approaches a defector to offer help or assistance to him, then the defector becomes used to following him," Kim told RFA.

Converts influence those back home

"If a Buddhist priest leads him, he goes to a temple, and if a Sister, then he goes to a Catholic church. This is absolutely true. If an evangelical does the same, he goes to a Protestant church," Kim said.

Defectors are often highly suspicious and distrustful at the beginning of new contacts, but later become open to religious teachings because of the unconditional assistance they receive from those who preach them.

Later, such defectors, who live precarious lives in hiding for fear of repatriation by the Chinese authorities, may spread their faith to other defectors, and even among relatives back home in North Korea, where only limited forms of state-sponsored worship are tolerated.

Lee Soon Ja said she used to run a shelter on behalf of evangelist missionaries for fugitive young North Koreans who had been reduced to begging and picking pockets.

"There were five young people in my sarangbang, a shelter furnished for those people who were taken care of by me," Lee told RFA.

"The youngest of them was 17 years old and the oldest was 21. I served meals for them, preached the Bible to them, and we prayed together. I sent the younger ones to school, and I finally settled here in South Korea," Lee said.

Living on the edge

She said many had influenced the beliefs of their families back home, who became interested in religion as a result of the experiences of North Koreans in China.

"One day a boy told me that a person in the [North Korean] Intelligence Service asked for me to bring a Bible with a zipper to him. So he sent it to him," Lee added.

"He might have been one of the boy's relatives who found out that the boy's visit was of great economic assistance to a family who had been long starved, and this seemed to make him request a Bible with a zipper," she said.

Rights activists and international observers say that between 50,000 and 350,000 North Koreans are currently in hiding in China.

Beijing, which fears a flood of refugees across its borders, has allowed some defectors to leave for a third country ostensibly for medical reasons.

The number of religious believers in North Korea is unknown, but has been estimated at 10,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 4,000 Catholics by overseas observers.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)
